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Mikkelsen, Bent Egberg

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Organic foods in public catering: Organisational development or a locomotive to boost organic sales?

Bent E. Mikkelsen

Abstract - In many countries public procurement policies of organic foods have become a popular instrument to increase the sale of organic produce. However, unlike the relatively uncomplicated "organic" change process in private households, the processes related to implementation of foods in public food systems have proved to be quite complicated. In order to study the nature of these systems and their ability to implement organic consumption a study of the Danish Green Procurement Programme (GPP) method was carried out. The GPP aimed at supporting organic consumption in public catering. The study included document analysis, qualitative interviews and a questionnaire based survey among practitioners at catering and municipal level. The results show that organic conversion processes in municipal catering is a multifaceted process. The process is not only concerned with substituting conventional foods with organic ones but involves a number of significant spin offs and ramifications. Instead of being a simple replacement process the conversion also functions as a change opportunity in which public food systems can develop and innovate. However the Danish case also shows that if organic procurement policies should be a reliable alternative sales channel, it is important at all times to keep the goal of the conversion in mind and not to neglect the need for constant monitoring of the progress of the organic procurement policy in terms of actual amounts of organic products. The case shows that such monitoring is needed both at institutional, municipal and national levels.¹

INTRODUCTION

Public procurement policies of organic foods have become a much used instrument to increase the sale of organic produce in many western European countries (Laberenz, 2000, Spiller et al. 2003, Mikkelsen et al. 2005, Mikkelsen & Elle 2005) and the idea that the public should lead the way as a role model and buy organic has derived political support in many countries (Rech, 2003). However, unlike the relatively uncomplicated processes related to organic consumption in private households the change processes related to implementation of foods in public food systems have been reported to be quite complicated and to involve a number of other steps in addition to merely substituting conventional foods with organic foods (Mikkelsen et al, 2005). O'Doherty et al (2001) suggest that the implementation of organic procurement policy in food service forces institutions to adapt to new conditions and that this adaptation seems to be associated with different "coping mechanisms".

PURPOSE

In order to study this seemingly complicated process and to discuss its implications for the potential for organic foods in this sector an analysis of the GPP, running from 1997 to 2003 involving 42 organic catering projects, was carried out.

METHODOLOGY

Three sources of data informed the study. Firstly, the applications and the final reports from applicants were analysed. Then qualitative interviews were carried out with key stakeholders in the sector and lastly a questionnaire-based survey was carried out among municipal project leaders.

RESULTS

The results show that organic conversion processes in municipalities is a multifaceted procedure with a number of significant spin offs and ramifications. Surprisingly, the organic foods itself only play part of the lead role while the resulting organisational process seems to be in focus. The results show that organic policy implementation processes can be very complicated procedures and lead to surprising results when put into practice.

The distinct and complex nature of the public food service environment plays a significant role here and this is an important barrier for the further dissemination of organic food in the sector. Secondly, the results show that the organic conversion process, due to its complicated nature, its interaction with the whole food service organisation and its "unfrozen" environment, it becomes subject to a number of change processes other than those just related to organic foods.

The organic procurement policy decision opportunity opens up a range of other agendas once the "plasticity" of the organisation is increased. The urgent need for changes to menus, innovation, capacity building, adoption of food policies are all examples of the ramifications and spin offs, which are made possible by the organisational change process. Finally, the results show that the organic message is translated differently by change agents in the municipalities and in the food service organisations. The organic conversion support scheme, as in the Danish case, is seen as a "problem" to which food service organisations are expected to react not necessarily by focusing on organic procurement but by trying to bring other pressing agendas into play.

¹ Is with the Department of Nutrition, Danish Institute for Food and Veterinary Research, 19 Mørkøjs Bygade, DK 2860 Soborg, bem@dfvf.dk

CONCLUSIONS

The lessons learnt from the organic conversion case clearly shows that implementation of organic foods in the public food systems is not a question of simple replacement of conventional food items with organic ones. Instead the process is a complicated change process involving a number of different stakeholders who have to share a common vision of how the outcome of the organic procurement policy should be.

Instead of being a replacement process the conversion also is a change opportunity that the food systems can use to develop their organisations in order to be better prepared for future challenges. Thus, the conversion has the ability to create better public food systems. However, the Danish case also shows that it is important at all times to keep the goal of the conversion in mind and not to neglect the need for constant monitoring of the progress of the organic procurement policy. The case shows that such monitoring in terms of amounts of organic foods is needed both at all levels.

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